

Recreation Advisory Board August 8, 2011



Members Present:

Wanda Hawthorne, Chair
Wayne Wheeler, Vice Chair
Josh O'Conner
Lonnie Gilliam
Mildred Nance-Carson
Todd Dunnuck
Hutch Kerns
Mary Ann West
Cecil Bothwell, City Council Liaison

Staff Present:

Roderick Simmons, Director
Debbie Ivester, Assistant Director
Megan Shepherd, Special Projects Coordinator
Frank McGowan, Business Services Superintendent
Amy Rickman, Interim Recreation Superintendent
Al Kopf, Park Planning & Development Superintendent

Wanda called the meeting to order at 12:33 p.m.

1. Welcome New Members

Wanda welcomed Josh O'Conner and Todd Dunnuck, the newest members of the Recreation Advisory Board.

2. Approval of July Minutes

Mildred motioned to approve the July minutes, Hutch seconded, and the July minutes were approved unanimously.

3. Fee Waiver Request: Carrier Park Picnic Shelter

Debbie presented a fee waiver request for the Carrier Park picnic shelter from West Asheville Business Association (WABA) to conduct a breakfast meeting in conjunction with the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce. They are requesting the shelter use fee of \$100 be reduced to \$30. Debbie explained that this is the first waiver request to come before the Board this year, so there is a \$3,000 balance available in fee waivers. This request would reduce that amount by \$70.

Wayne asked the WABA representative if visitors to Asheville have to pay for WABA and Chamber of Commerce services. Scott said that West Asheville residents don't pay for WABA services, since they mainly provide online services such as communications

about home break-ins, graffiti, etc. There is, however, a \$50 annual membership fee for businesses.

Lonnie moved to grant the request and reduce the fee to \$30. Mildred seconded.

Hutch asked what percentage of the \$3,000 the Board gave out last year. Debbie said since the policy began, fewer requests have come forward. The Board used \$100-150 last year, because there weren't many requests. City Council handles requests over \$500.

All approved and the motion passed unanimously.

4. Golf Course RFP Update

Roderick gave a presentation on the options available for management of the golf course. In researching this issue to prepare a Request for Proposals (RFP), staff determined that the primary challenges are to make it affordable, accessible, maintain or improve course conditions, and provide a variety of programs. Another challenge is to meet the financial objectivity, including reducing or eliminating subsidies, creating a reserve for repairs, fund ongoing capital improvements, cover debt service, and generating cash flow.

There are several management alternatives, including self-operation, full-service management contract, operating lease, and a concession agreement.

- Self-operation. This is what the Department currently uses, and is the simplest option and gives the City the most control. However, a disadvantage is that it may require subsidies if revenues are down.
- Full-service management. In this model, the City would fund all capital improvements, and the management firm would hire and manage employees. This usually results in a lower operating cost and greater golf management expertise. However, the operating risk remains with the City.
- Operating Lease. This model takes most of the overhead, responsibility, and risk away from the City and puts it onto the lessee. The lessee is responsible for day-to-day operations, employee management, and pays the municipality a fixed rent as well as all operating expenses. The City may still be responsible for capital improvements.
- Concession. This is probably not a long-term, sustainable model, as it only involves leasing out certain elements such as the snack bar or pro shop.

Wayne asked for clarification of the “risk” involved. Roderick explained the City would still be at risk even if a full-service company operated the golf course, because the City is still responsible for complaints, problems, and the ultimate success of the program.

The choice will depend on the level of control desired by the City, the subsidy required, staff requirements, financing covenants, and the level of “in-house” expertise in place. Staff will talk to the City Council Finance Committee about these issues.

Mildred had heard of a local golf course that recently went under and is up for sale. She asked Roderick if he knew why it had failed and if similar factors might affect the City's course. Roderick said Asheville Municipal Golf Course has potential to be a successful golf course, given Asheville's tourist infrastructure.

Cecil asked what the price difference would be if the irrigation system on the back nine was on one meter instead of multiple ones, as it is now. Roderick said the difference would be significant because the Water Department charges a fee per meter. Cecil also asked how much the fee per round would have to be for the current golf traffic to be self-sufficient. Roderick said so much depends on the weather and the economy, it is hard to predict. But we could do some modeling for a typical fee for a round.

Amy explained that raising fees isn't always the best idea because as golf suffers nationwide, all courses are lowering their fees, so we may get to a point where we are competing with private courses, which isn't ideal. The answer may actually be in lowering fees to encourage play. Some "test" special days have indicated this may be successful.

Hutch asked if the subsidy numbers will be around the same this year as last year. Roderick said the figures haven't been prepared yet but yes, they are similar.

Todd said he used to sit on the Lake Lure Parks & Rec Board, which went through a similar process last year in regards to Lake Lure's golf course. He recommended Roderick contact that director to discuss their options. Lake Lure decided to work with CourseDoctors, who were able to turn things around.

Lonnie expressed his concern that records of rounds played aren't accurate. Players often abuse golf privileges because there's no monitoring system. People play extra rounds or walk-on daily. Roderick said the numbers we use when factoring cost/benefit are paying rounds, so the others are important but don't factor into the accounting.

Cecil added there's an additional labor cost in the back nine to have to manually turn on each meter. Josh asked what the management company's incentive to turn a profit is. Roderick explained that is part of the risk the City would have to undertake. Mildred asked if there could be a probationary period, which Roderick said is possible.

Mary Ann felt that all the models seemed upside-down except the lease. She felt like the City should step aside and let a private company turn it into a profit-maker. She felt a private company might not have to raise the rounds price if they make money on concessions. Wayne agreed with Mary Ann. He felt the City must adhere to so many rules and regulations that a private company wouldn't have to worry about.

Roderick explained the next step is for the issue to go to City Council's Finance Committee next week. Josh said that he previously sat on the Transit Committee, which went through a management company transfer, and found there were oversight problems,

especially in regards to staff. He recommended Department staff keep this in mind when making decisions.

5. Nature Center Strategic Plan Preview

Chris Gentile, Director of the WNC Nature Center, gave a preview presentation on the Nature Center's new strategic plan process. Schultz & Williams was the consultant firm who ran this strategic plan. They looked at competitors, opportunities, spoke to visitors and staff, and created a business plan. After that plan came into place, the Nature Center started to look at how to improve the facility to become a real asset to Asheville. Chris stated that visitors come from all over North Carolina and the US to visit the Nature Center.

Chris explained that the first step in this process was to look at the mission. The Nature Center has an opportunity to connect people to a very unique ecosystem. The strategic business plan focused on visibility and awareness, conservation, the guest experience and facilities, organization, and funding.

Chris then showed architect renderings of how the WNC Nature Center could grow. This includes an improved welcome experience starting at ground-level with amenities, concessions and habitats. This will improve the orientation and mapping of the center. The Nature Center also wants to upgrade the farm area, which might include snakes, foxes, and other "uninvited" farm habitat animals. Another upgraded area would be called Appalachian Journey, possibly including cougars, bobcats, cranes, bison, black bear, and elk. There is also room for future expansion at the space near the Trillium Trail. This could be an exhibit with exotic animals from other similar mountainous habitats across the world, or Prehistoric Appalachia, which would contain red pandas, sloths, tapirs, or other animals that used to live in this area in prehistoric times. Another opportunity would be a family play area, where kids could engage in natural play. Another section would be Unseen Appalachians that contain smaller animals like bats, butterflies, skunks, weasels, and small nocturnal animals. This could also include fish. There would also be a service "behind the scenes" area with vet tech area, food prep, commissary, staff parking, and more.

Chris said that these improvements are doable and within a reasonable budget. Working with WDM Architects, who specialize in zoos, helped staff determine what was feasible. Some funding is already available for these changes. For example, starting next year the Nature Center is going to move the entrance to ground-level in a Phase I. The Friends of the Nature Center has also already funded an improved playground area that will be built next year near the Trillium Nature Area. In the next three years, the Nature Center plans on installing a permanent butterfly exhibit, and extending the boardwalk over the deer and bear habitats to connect to the cougar/bobcat area.

Wayne asked if the land is all City property, which it is. Wayne asked if People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) ever gives the Nature Center trouble. Chris said they haven't, largely because the Nature Center is accredited by the Association of Zoos

and Aquariums (AZA) and maintains very high standards. PETA focuses more on road-side attractions or pets.

6. Board Development Online

Megan described the new board member training program and demonstrated how it works. There are six new online modules that members can access at any time, and include information on the City of Asheville, the Department of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Arts, the role of board members, conducting a meeting, marketing and communications, and budgeting and planning. The online presentations are available at <http://www.ashevillenc.gov/departments/ParksRCA/default.aspx?id=13242>.

7. Board Applicant Recommendation

Debbie read the names and background on the different applicants for the one vacant position.

Wayne recommended Barry Mundt.

Todd recommended Barry Mundt and Robert Pierce.

Mary Ann recommended Barry Mundt.

Josh recommended Robert Pierce and John Broadbrooks.

Lonnie recommended Barry Mundt.

Hutch recommended John Broadbooks and Robert Pierce.

Wayne moved to recommend City Council interview Barry Mundt and Robert Pierce, Mary Ann seconded, all were in favor and the motion passed unanimously.

8. FY 12-13 CIP Public Comment

Wanda reminded the Board that the September meeting time will be extended to offer a public comment period for the FY 12-13 Capital Improvement Project (CIP) plan. Debbie said the Department will advertise the comment session with a press release, social media postings, and neighborhood coordinator outreach. Board members are welcome to push it out to other groups.

Debbie explained that a public comment session is an opportunity for the public to come in and comment on the FY 12-13 CIP plan. Board members don't have to respond to all comments, but all comments will be recorded.

Roderick added that the CIP subcommittee will help organize this and collect responses. When it is time to advise on the CIP process, the subcommittee will take these public comments into consideration. Mildred, Lonnie and Hutch agreed to be on the CIP subcommittee.

Wayne asked Roderick why several of the projects on the fourth quarter report say “deferred” but are completed. Roderick explained the terminology of “deferred maintenance” projects.

9. Director’s Report

Roderick presented the fourth quarter report and said that the comprehensive annual report will be coming out shortly.

Construction on the new recreation center is coming along and a full Certificate of Occupancy should be coming in the next few weeks. We are 1-2 points away from being Platinum LEED-rated, which is a real milestone and big accomplishment for the Department.

Wayne asked for a status update on the new playground at Martin Luther King, Jr. Park. Roderick said the construction is right on schedule, and will be complete by mid-September.

10. Reports

Pack Square Conservancy: Roderick reported that this month’s meeting was cancelled.

Bele Chere Committee: Wanda attended Bele Chere and saw several board members there. Todd volunteered at an information kiosk and enjoyed the experience. Wanda said that the Bele Chere Committee hasn’t met since the festival ended, but budget information will be forthcoming. Roderick added that the City’s legal department is looking into what can be done about the street preachers. It’s a free speech issue, so it’s very complicated to restrict their presence. Cecil added that this is an issue nation-wide. He had heard from several residents at the Vanderbuilt Apartments, who stated their preference for acoustic-only stages, in the interest of keeping noise levels down. Another resident requested all food vendors be local. Lonnie said St. Lawrence church had a small problem with Mass on Saturday because of the festival, but in general it was fine.

Asheville Parks & Greenways Foundation: Wayne reported there hasn’t been a meeting since he became the liaison.

11. Other Business

Wanda said City Council will consider the two names for the new recreation center at the City Council meeting tomorrow at 5:00 p.m.

Wanda and Wayne will be traveling to the Citizen Board Meeting in Greensboro next weekend and will report back with information.

Lonnie said that in the previous meeting, he felt a “white guilt” issue arose from several board members. Wanda did her job presenting what the Blue Ribbon Panel committee

recommended, and the board chose to vacillate from that in response to the residents who attended, who were largely African American. Hutch said he didn't feel any "white guilt" or pressure based on the presenters' race.

The meeting adjourned at 2:12 p.m.